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The Importance of Bilingualism and Multilingualism

Bilingualism and multilingualism represent complex occurrences shaped by multiple levels of influence, ranging from individual developmental processes to broader societal contexts. At the individual level, children's developmental abilities provide the foundation for language learning, while family and educational environments offer immediate opportunities for growth. These experiences unfold dynamically over time and are embedded within wider social frameworks that determine language status and community support. Successful bilingual development therefore requires alignment across these levels, ensuring that children's innate learning capacities meet sustained language input and supportive conditions (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2025). Beyond child development, multilingualism plays a crucial role in institutional and global contexts. It strengthens communication and advocacy, ensures inclusivity in programme outcomes, and fosters diverse collaborations and partnerships. Together, these perspectives highlight the importance of bilingualism and multilingualism as systems that thrive when supported by coordinated influences across developmental, social, and institutional levels (UNICRI, 2024).

Multilingualism and bilingualism provide children, families, and communities with a wide range of benefits. For children, growing up with more than one language can lead to improved literacy and language skills, enhanced creativity and problem-solving abilities, and stronger academic performance across subjects. It also helps them develop the ability to view the world from multiple perspectives, which can later translate into more diverse career and travel opportunities. Importantly, bilingual children often experience a greater sense of self-worth and belonging, as they feel connected to their heritage, communicate confidently with extended family, and enjoy cultural expressions such as music, movies, and literature in multiple

languages. For families, multilingualism strengthens communication, deepens emotional bonds, and reinforces cultural identity, making it easier to participate in traditions and maintain a shared sense of belonging. Communities also benefit when children speak more than one language, as this fosters appreciation of diverse cultures and encourages empathy for different perspectives (Raising Children Network, 2021). Beyond social and cultural advantages, research using brain imaging techniques has shown that bilingual individuals engage specific cognitive regions when switching between languages. For example, tasks requiring bilinguals to alternate between naming objects in Spanish and English activate the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), a region linked to attention and inhibition, highlighting the cognitive flexibility associated with bilingualism (Abutalebi & Green, 2007). Together, these findings demonstrate that bilingualism not only enriches personal and cultural identity but also enhances cognitive development, family cohesion, and community understanding.

English is the most widely spoken language globally, acting as a bridge for communication among people from diverse linguistic backgrounds. With billions of speakers, proficiency in English enables individuals to connect effectively across borders. For native speakers, using English in professional contexts often feels natural and effortless, but for those who learn it as a foreign language or live in regions where English is not commonly spoken, career opportunities can sometimes feel restricted. In this context, bilingualism offers significant practical advantages. Research has shown that the cognitive and sensory processing improvements associated with bilingual experience enhance the ability to process environmental information, creating a clearer signal for learning (Marian & Shook, 2012). This heightened attention to detail not only supports academic and professional success but also explains why bilingual adults tend to acquire a third language more effectively than monolingual adults acquire a second language (Marian & Shook, 2012). The bilingual brain's ability to manage multiple linguistic systems strengthens cognitive flexibility, which in turn facilitates more efficient learning and communication. Thus, while English serves as a common language globally, the added benefits of bilingualism extend beyond communication, influencing cognitive development, learning capacity, and career prospects. These findings highlight that bilingualism is not simply about knowing two languages; it is about acquiring a set of

cognitive skills that provide lifelong advantages in both personal and professional domains (Marian & Shook, 2012).

Bilingualism has been studied extensively by scientists interested in how speaking two languages fluently affects cognition. With the development of MRI technology, researchers can now visually compare monolingual and bilingual brains. The brain is composed of neurones, which include a cell body and dendrites, collectively referred to as grey matter. Bilingual individuals have more neurones and dendrites than monolinguals, resulting in denser grey matter. In addition, bilingualism influences white matter, which consists of nerve fibres connecting the four lobes of the brain and coordinating communication across regions. Adults who speak two languages demonstrate increased white matter integrity compared to those who speak only one, meaning their second language experience enhances the brain's reserves. Importantly, students who begin learning a second language later in life can still experience neurological benefits, regardless of proficiency level. Novelty plays a crucial role in forming new neural connections, while practice helps maintain them. Language learning combines both novelty and practice, as learners acquire new vocabulary and grammatical structures while reinforcing prior knowledge. This process makes language learning an effective workout for the brain, protecting older learners against dementia and other degenerative neurological conditions. Ultimately, language learning benefits everyone, as it is one of the most complex mental activities available, offering a powerful way to strengthen and exercise the brain (Spence, 2022).

Divergent thinking, often considered a key component of creativity, involves the ability to generate multiple solutions or ideas for a given problem. It has been suggested that bilingual children might show enhanced divergent thinking due to strengthened executive functions or exposure to diverse cultural contexts. However, research findings in this area have been inconsistent, with some studies reporting a bilingual advantage and others failing to replicate such results. These discrepancies may stem from methodological limitations, such as small sample sizes or lack of rigorous study designs. A recent well-powered, pre-registered study directly examined the relationship between bilingualism and divergent thinking in children and found no evidence supporting a bilingual advantage. This suggests that earlier

mixed findings may have been influenced by false positives rather than genuine effects. While bilingualism is associated with many developmental benefits, including linguistic flexibility and cognitive control, divergent thinking does not appear to be one of them. The study highlights the importance of robust methodology in evaluating claims about bilingualism and creativity, and it cautions against overstating the link between bilingualism and divergent thinking in children (Booton et al., 2021).

Drawing on systems theories, bilingual development can be understood as the result of multiple interacting levels of influence. At the individual level, maturational processes provide the foundation for language acquisition, while immediate experiences with family and educational contexts create opportunities for learning. These experiences unfold dynamically over time and are embedded within broader societal contexts that shape language status and community support. For bilingual development to be successful, alignment across these system levels is essential: children's innate learning abilities must be met with sustained and rich language input, alongside supportive social conditions. This framework highlights systematic patterns in bilingual development and underscores the importance of coordinated, multilevel approaches to fostering positive outcomes (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2025). In parallel, the UNICRI framework emphasises the broader significance of multilingualism within institutional and societal contexts. It demonstrates how multilingualism strengthens communication and advocacy, ensuring that programme outcomes are inclusive, targeted, and responsive to diverse populations. Within the fields of security and crime prevention, multilingualism contributes to revitalised multilateralism by fostering diverse collaborations, multilingual partnerships, and interconnected technical hubs. Importantly, multilingualism also ensures justice is accessible by enabling communication in languages that people understand, thereby reinforcing equity and inclusivity (UNICRI, 2024). Together, these perspectives illustrate that bilingualism and multilingualism are most effective when supported by systemic alignment, whether in child development or institutional frameworks, underscoring the need for coordinated approaches across multiple levels to maximise outcomes.

The significance of bilingualism and multilingualism lies in their ability to bridge individual learning processes with broader societal and institutional needs. While bilingualism in children depends on the dynamic interplay of development, experience, and context, multilingualism within organisations ensures inclusivity, accessibility, and effective collaboration. Both frameworks emphasise that language outcomes are not isolated achievements but the result of systemic alignment across multiple levels. Bilingual children require rich language input and supportive environments, while multilingual institutions rely on diverse partnerships and communication strategies to achieve equitable outcomes (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2025) Taken together, these insights underscore that the value of bilingualism and multilingualism extends beyond linguistic ability, reflecting their role in fostering coordinated, inclusive, and sustainable development across personal and societal contexts (UNICRI, 2024).

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